



# Fact sheet

## The Horse Industry's Responsibility to Animal Welfare

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Recently there has been growing concern over the actions of animal rights activists as they pertain to the horse industry. While many animal rights actions may be illegal and based on emotion and not facts, they still occur and will continue to take place on an ever-increasing basis. It is every horseowner's, rider's, trainer's and enthusiast's responsibility to ensure the well-being of the animal that is the backbone of our wonderful industry and to take it upon him/herself to be knowledgeable of how to interact with animal rights activists.

In 1990, the American Horse Council, after much deliberation of the Animal Welfare Task Force, came up with policy statements dealing with animal rights activists as it pertains to the horse industry. This was printed as an information sheet and is available from AHC.

Highlights from that publication are as follows. It is important to distinguish between the terms **animal rights activist** and **animal welfare group**. The activist is committed to changing the moral attitude of the world to the view that all animals should be free and not to be used for **any** utilitarian purpose. In this philosophy, the humane care of animals is irrelevant, because any use, including mere ownership of animals, is judged morally wrong. On the other hand, animal welfare groups, which include animal scientists, are concerned with the proper care and management of animals in their use.

Concerns of most interest to animal welfare and animal rights groups include vegetarianism, treatment of companion animals, factory farming, animal use in research, hunting and trapping, and related issues.

Areas where the horse industry might be involved include: training methodology, racing and showing horses, medication of animals, use of horses in research, keeping of horses in urban environments, and general care and maintenance of horses.

For the most part, horse people share the concern of welfare groups with respect to humane treatment of horses. However, horseowners and organizations must realize that, regardless of the care given our animals, some activist groups will continue to attack the use of horses as "exploitation," with a view to disrupting the use of horses by humans. Horse people **must** be prepared to defend horse farms and horse sports and events from unwarranted attacks by animal rights groups.

This can only be accomplished by cooperative efforts industry wide. These efforts should focus on monitoring activists' activities, developing common strategies for coping with legal and legislative attacks, creating positive public relations for the industry, and, when warranted, sponsoring research to provide factual information about industry practices.

Experience from other animal agriculturalists has demonstrated that one must not overreact to criticism from activists whose main goal is to disrupt and attack. The horse industry should not be surprised if it becomes an increasingly visible target of these groups. Horse people should be careful not to respond to any criticism in any way that makes us more vulnerable to the opponent. Since the natural response is to reply immediately to an attack, delaying a response requires discipline and a strategy for dealing with the criticism over the long run.

Strategies adapted to the horse industry to accomplish this goal are as follows:

- 1) Do not initiate debate with activists about animal welfare/rights issues and avoid public exchanges over incorrect or planted media reports.
- 2) Be generous and forthcoming with information and activities which demonstrate good horse care and management practices and the positive role horses play in preserving open space and providing healthy and wholesome recreation for millions.
- 3) Do not equivocate, vacillate or apologize when a stand is in order. In this case, take a strong and positive stand.
- 4) Establish and maintain strong lines of communication with local, regional or national media representatives. This is best accomplished by designating key spokespersons who should receive professional media training.
- 5) Remember, acknowledge and be proud of our tradition to tolerate diverse opinions as long as they don't violate the civil rights of others. This is the moral high ground and the public expects nothing less.

There **are** cases of harm to horses through neglect, ignorance or even intentional abuse. Nonetheless, the equine industry must be prepared to deal with these rare occurrences openly and honestly. The industry must be willing to take the initiative to remove horses from situations of neglect or abuse.

Recently the American Horse Shows Association (AHSA) adopted a Statement of Principle on the animal welfare issue as it refers to horses in competition. It also acts as an advisory tool for the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) in international competitions. The Statement of Principle states that the AHSA is committed to:

- Upholding the welfare of horses, regardless of value, as a primary consideration in all activities.
- Requiring that horses be treated with the kindness,

respect and compassion they deserve and never be subjected to abuse.

- Ensuring that owners, trainers and exhibitors or their agents use responsible care in the handling, treatment and transportation of their horses as well as horses owned and placed in their care for any purpose.
- Providing for the continuous well-being of horses by encouraging routine inspection and consultation with health care professionals and competition officials to achieve the highest possible standards of nutrition, health, comfort, sanitation and safety as a matter of standard operating procedure.
- Continuing to support scientific studies on equine health and stress-related issues.
- Increasing education in training and horsemanship practices.
- Requiring owners, trainers and exhibitors to know and follow their sanctioning organizations' rules, and to work within industry regulations in all equestrian competitions.
- Reviewing, revising and developing competition rules and regulations that protect the welfare of horses.

Yes, the horse industry does have its work cut out for it. We must take this issue seriously and not be discouraged by forthcoming events that may interfere with our equestrian activities. What we must do is be prepared to prove that our equine friends are well cared for and not mistreated. This can only be accomplished by providing the public with factual data supporting our industry activities. Research in areas such as stress management are critical to provide this necessary data. Monetary support for these studies should come from those who enjoy the equine industry.

Remember that public perception is important. How the equine industry presents its horses, how the public perceives they are being treated, trained and cared for will ultimately determine who controls the industry.